A TIME FOR DECLARING

Joshua 24:14-18
Mark 8:27-28

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"To be or not to be: that is the question." It is also the most celebrated line ever written for the stage. It is from Hamlet, a powerful drama of passion and grief, in which the playwrite addresses the most profound human question, whether life is worth living in a world of tragedy and sorrow.

> At one point Hamlet laments: "...God! God! How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world!"

The intriguing idea in the celebrated line, however, is that one decides whether or not to live: that you and I have the awesome capability and responsibility of deciding to be or not to be.

Our best art, literature, philosophy and psychology confirm the idea. The late Paul Tillich wrote a book which spoke to a generation of seekers under the title The Courage to Be. Professor Tillich said: "The courage to be is the ethical act in which man affirms his own being..." (P.3) Rollo May, in a book on creativity, reminds us from the point of view of the psychological disciplines, that our identity as persons is the product of the choices we make. Acorns become oak trees and kittens become cats automatically: no decision need be made. "But" says Rollo May, "a man or a woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices...People attain dignity and worth by the multitude of decisions they make from day to day." (The Courage to Create, P.4/5)

That idea, that you and I decide to be, is a major Biblical motif. Adam and Eve become human when they start to make decisions, even though the first ones turn out rather poorly. From beginning to end, Old Testament to New Testament, individuals "become" in moments of courageous decision. People in the Bible confront their destiny, as it were, in the form of God's call, God's summons to them -- to Abraham to go on a journey, to Moses to return to Egypt, to the people to leave their bondage, to David to be King, to Jeremiah to speak the Word, to James, John, Simon and Andrew, to leave fishing nets and follow. And in the response, in the decision to obey those people become the people God created them to be.

We've heard all those stories from childhood: unlikely tales of forbidden fruit and talking serpents; of Pharohs and task masters and plagues of locusts and frogs of all things; of amazing escapes through the sea and forty years lost in a wilderness; of marching armies and walls that come tumbling down at the sound of a trumpet.

Back when we heard them first they were mildly interesting stories, but remote, bizarre even. If you've ever tried to catch one small frog, after he escaped into your second grade classroom, you will forever smile when reading about Cairo, knee-deep in frogs.

And then we learned the literary analysis of these stories, when a college professor insisted that we read them -- "critically" -- was the word he used. We had to acknowledge that the Pentateuch is not an NBC Documentary, but rather a fragmented, ragged collection of family folk tales handed down across a thousand generations, with all the literary characteristics of a serialized soap opera. And about the time we are ready to put these stories back up on the top shelf, between A Child's Garden of Verse and the seldom used set of World Books, something stunning happens. We begin to hear our own name in these stories and our children's names, and our friends, and our church, and our community, and our nation.

"That's me in there!" The word becomes flesh in the most remarkable ways. That's you and me they're talking about, stumbling around in the wilderness, grumbling and complaining about how nice we used to have it. That's us in there, on a journey to some promised land called maturity, wholeness, personhood, having to learn on the way to trust God. That's us in there; yes, peering hopefully across the rooftops for some Bathsheba to help us deal with our midlife crisis: or running for our lives, in cold terror, from some Jezebel: or sitting in the rubble of crushed dreams and crying "Why me, O Lord!"

The people in the Bible are called, named and sent by God. Along their way, at every junction, they have to make decisions. The message is that their identity, their emerging personhood and nationhood as God's people is being hammered out, forged, as they decide. This morning, in the tight, little sequence we heard as an Old Testament lesson Joshua, near the end of his life, calls the people together and puts it to them directly.

> "Choose this day whom you will serve: the gods your fathers used to serve, or the gods of the Amorites...as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord..."
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> "Choose this day when you will serve," which meant, of course, "Choose this day who you will be."

So it was with another group of travelers, centuries later, more-or-less following a teacher from Nazareth, sometimes with high intentionality, but mostly hesitantly, reluctantly. Mid-journey, near a place called Caesarea Phillipi a time for decision-making, for declaring, happens.

> "Who do you say that I am?" he asks, and one of them responds, "You are the Christ."

And what follows shows that the identity at stake here is not his at all, but theirs. The question of the moment is truly: "Who are you? Who will you be now

The issue this places before us, therefore, is not what it seems at first. It is not so much the correct name for Jesus, the best theological formula by which to describe our belief about him, as it is our identity, our decision to be

men and women who believe in him, follow him, live for him. We would learn the importance of that difference from the world if we listened very long. The world has never cared much about our intramural theological disputes. Those medieval theologians arguing about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin were doing what Christians do too much of, namely excited about irrelevancies. There is more than a little prophetic truth in the subway graffiti, "Christ is the answer: beneath which someone had scribbled with galvanizing, unarguable honesty, "What's the question?"

The world isn't asking the theological questions. No, that's not true. The world isn't asking the theological questions in the theological language with which we are comfortable. That's the point of the text, Jesus, by re-directing the question forced the disciples to move from theological discussion to personal decision-making. "What are people saying about me?" That's the theological question. What did Tillich say? What does Barth say on the subject, or Hans Kung or Rosemary Reuther? The pursuit is important and interesting. But it can be neutral and safely intellectual. "But who do you say that I am?" To believe in Jesus Christ is not to give intellectual assent to ideas about him; it is to follow him. It is to trust him, bank one's life on him, acknowledge his Lordship over the entirety of life, obey his call, do his will, follow his teaching.

Professor Harvey Cox of Harvard Divinity School, in his recent book Religion in the Secular City, observes: "Arguments about the significance of Jesus have always been political as well as theological. The various titles and interpretations of Jesus -- Messiah, Son of Man -- were not invented in seminars but came out of a contentious and conflict-ridden human history." (P.234)

Cox argues that Western Christianity has intellectualized the Gospel by transforming every important issue into a question of doctrine. When Jesus invites people literally to put their own lives on the line by asking them who they think he is, we turn it into a discussion of Christology. Cox argues convincingly, as do all the "liberation" theologians, that in the Third World, a religion that confines itself to keeping its doctrine orthodox, and ignoring the aspirations of the poor, the hungry, the oppressed -- will not only be regarded as irrelevant, but more often than not will be seen to be part of the system, the structures responsible for oppression.

"The argument about who Jesus was" Cox asserts, "is also about who he is." (P.235) The Christian issue is the matter of discipleship: not what beliefs we hold in that corner of our mind reserved for transcendence, but what decision we make in the secular sphere which express the Lordship of Jesus Christ and thereby our identity as his disciples.

Our neo-Evangelical brothers and sisters are reminding us that Christianity begins with a personal response to Jesus Christ: that at the center of it all is an intensely personal encounter with God's love for me, and the acceptance of that love as it has been expressed in Jesus Christ: in the commitment to be his man, his woman, forever. We need an occasional reminder that there is passion here: heart and soul and tears and great laughter: that this is no simple intellectual arrangement; that without the passion our faith becomes brittle, fragile, unimportant. That is a reminder we Presbyterians need. But

there is more than passion. "Passion must be harnessed" Frederick Buechner told a class of seminary graduates. "...the power that stirs the heart must become the power that stirs the hands and feet because it is the places your feet take you to and the work you find for your hands that finally proclaim who you and who Christ is." (A Room Called Remember, P.147).

Jesus, it appears, wanted more than private, personal acceptance of the salvation he offered. He wanted bodies, lives. "Believe in me" means "follow me, live with me, live for me, love me by obeying me."

The essence of being a Christian in this, or any, age is declaring one's allegiance by following where he leads and working for his Kingdom. Its essence is the opening of one's life to direction by him. That's the rub. That's the essential conflict between Christ and culture: between the demands of the Gospel and the very simple human propensity to do what I want when I want to do it: to get everything one can while the getting is good.

Our culture, in fact, brazenly suggests that our true identity, our selfhood, will be discovered as we do our own thing, not someone else's thing. Individual self-actualization will result from "getting in touch with my own needs, living my own agenda, etc."

When that spiritual equation is set in the context of, and begins to be one of the philosophic motives of, a market economy, the results are dreadful. Adam Smith's ideas about a free market, by the way, were devised originally as a way humankind might alleviate poverty. Matthew Fox, at Mundelein College, suggests that we are educated daily to become compulsive consumers...walking garbage cans, espousing the philosophy 'I buy, therefore I am'." The former head of NBC and Curtis Publishing, Matthew J. Culligan, says that if our economic system fails it will be because "the principle compulsion of most people running American business today is to make short-run profits. 'The disease', he declares 'is greed'." (M. Fox, A Spirituality Called Compassion, P.193,196)

A Today Show feature a few weeks ago explored the incredible array of choices Americans must make in the marketplace and the energy we are willing to invest in the process. A critic suggested that 119 different department store brands and shades of lipstick, and 17 kinds of catfood on the supermarket shelves is a trivialization of our culture. The apologist, on the other hand, applauded the range of choice -- "Isn't it great," he said, "a mark of the individualism which is possible in our culture compared to others."

In fact, is that where our identity is posited? Is the cosmetic counter or the pet food aisle at the supermarket where we become fully human? Is it not a vulgarization and a gross trivialization of both our great culture and our potential as human beings, if it all comes to rest on choosing one catfood out of 17?

There is an older, better truth than that. It is that in committing ourselves to something or someone other than ourselves that we truly become a human being. There is something about our humanity that is authenticated and celebrated by our will, our choices, our courage to be. There is something high and holy in the intentional life for others. Jesus said it with elegant simplicity: "The person who saves life will lose it. The person who loses his life for my sake will find it."

That is what is at stake time and time again in those old stories in the Bible. God calls and people have to decide. Joshua confronts the people of Israel and says "Choose this day whom you will serve...Decide, now, who you will be." It is what is at stake when Jesus asks the twelve who they think he is. It is what is at stake in a particular way for the church today.

The Church of Christ is called to declare his Lordship. That is our purpose, our mission. We cannot do it any longer in splendid isolation. A Session resolution on the Lordship of Christ is not likely to cause a ripple on Michigan Avenue. The world no longer arranges itself around our walls, as it did in the middle ages, listening, watching, attentive. Today, we must be Christ's church, radically involved with the world. Professor Cox calls it "worldly spirituality" and writes: "The new spirituality is nurtured by a rhythm of advance and retreat, of wading into the pain and conflict of the secular realm and repairing regularly into the sustenance of solitude and of a supporting community." (Op.Cit., P.210)

Our being here is an eloquent declaration. Roger Kennedy, Director of the Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institute, has authored a stunningly beautiful book of pictures and essays on American Churches. In a chapter on Cathedrals he writes: "A visitor to New York who stands on Fifth Avenue between Rockefeller Center and Fifty Seventh Street can see that, in the glassy shadows of the skyscrapers, there lurks an older way of stating reality. There are two great churches that state that older way even amid that domain of high contemporary fashion -- St. Thomas' and St. Patrick's.

Our presence here is a declaration. What we do here: how we express our theology in behavioral terms is an eloquent declaration. When homeless people are cared for, when the hungry are fed and the cold clothed, when the anxious and afraid are comforted, and when the happy and whole are affirmed, the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life is eloquently declared.

This is Stewardship Sunday, and this is a Stewardship sermon. The issue is not simply money. If it were we could divide the budget by the number of members and send everybody a bill. But the issue most certainly is money in that your pledge to the church is one of those decisions on which you make a declaration about the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and about who you are in relationship to him.

This church is in mission because people before us declared themselves and gave generously, providing for the church's mission in their times and ours as well. We are still here in the glassy shadows of Michigan Avenue because of them. We are able to be in mission here, however, to the extent that you and I make our declaration in our day.

The programs cost money. You will learn how much if you read the information which will come to you in the mail.

The vital matter is the human question. Who shall we be? How shall we live? How shall we use our resources? How shall we vote? How shall we live our lives in ways that matter, ways that contribute something important? How

shall we make responsible use of the life God has given us? The Gospel of Christ is bold to suggest that his Lordship is relevant here: not just in our minds where we struggle intellectually with truth and doubt. The Gospel is bold to suggest that our belief in him means we will listen to him in matters of justice: that when we know about injustice and oppression we will hear him at least as clearly as our political party's platform or our corporation's profit and loss statement. To accept Jesus as Lord means that we will hear him when the hungry and homeless are at the door: that we will hear his word about loving enemies and being reconciled to those with whom we differ -- with at least as much attentiveness as we give anyone. But the most important point, the point we lose, is that our allegiance to him in these daily matters of living is the way our personhood comes into focus.

"Who do you say that I am?" Every day becomes a time for declaring: and the life we live, in families, work, play, struggle, in leisure, success and failure -- becomes the place we declare who our Lord is and who we are.

The summons is to do that -- each of us -- this day and every day: now, in the quiet of worship, in private gestures of devotion and commitment, in important decisions about Stewardship, and then in the world again and again, as we give ourselves to the great adventure of living as his people. Amen.

Praise to you, Lord God, for the gift of our selves. Praise to you, creator God, for giving us the responsibility to become, to be, to will to live fully.

Praise to you, Lord of love, for gentle nurture: for calling us to be yours, for prodding us and pushing us and leading us into fuller humanity.

Help us to see that in your service we become the people you want us to be: that in giving we do receive: that in loving the world and one another we love you best and serve you most effectively.

Praise to you, Lord God: in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.